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ERNEST JESSE PALMER, 1875–1962

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With portrait

ERNEST JESSE PALMER died at Webb City, Missouri, on February 25, 1962, in his 87th year. This marked the end of a long and in many ways remarkable career in the fields of botany and allied sciences.

He was born in Leicester, England, April 8, 1875, and, in 1878, when he was three years old, he and his sister, Louise, were brought to this country by their parents, Amos and Annie Palmer, who settled temporarily near Warrensburg, in Johnson County, Missouri. When he was 14, his father, responding to the stories of quick wealth offered by the mining opportunities in the southwestern part of Missouri, moved the family to Webb City and built a home for them at 321 South Main Street. The wealth never materialized! Throughout the rest of his life, although he spent many of his years away from Webb City, the Palmer home was maintained, and after retirement, Ernest Palmer moved with his family and lived out the rest of his life there.

In this mining area, young Palmer did find a wealth of his own liking. It was here that he began his studies of natural phenomena. In the piles of waste material from the mines, fossils of plants and animals caught his fancy, and as in all boys of his age the collecting instinct came to the fore. He developed a great keenness for unearthing most interesting artifacts. In later years at the Arnold Arboretum he was always "picking up" Indian arrowheads and other Indian deposits. This was easy for him, but not necessarily for others. I can recall his telling me of a spot in the Arboretum where arrowheads were in abundance. I hurried to the exact location but found nothing. The next day we went out together — and sure enough, he picked up several more artifacts. Eventually two attractive trays of Palmer's finds in the Arboretum were mounted and have been on display there ever since.

His formal education was broken off suddenly while he was attending high school. A physical collapse of his father made it necessary for him to leave school and seek employment. This was undoubtedly a severe

¹ This article on Mr. Palmer will be published also in the current volume of *Rhodora*, but without the bibliography. C.E.K.

blow to his pride because he wanted an education above all things. He loved study and research — and he intended to continue it at all costs. Just recently I learned from an article by Marcia W. Kershaw, a Special Correspondent of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, that Palmer managed to study Latin and Greek at old Webb City Baptist College. I had often wondered where he obtained his profound knowledge of these languages, especially Latin which he used so ably in his original technical descriptions of new species of plants. Mrs. Kershaw's article brought to light many other facets of Mr. Palmer's career which were previously unknown to me and I am very thankful to her for her assistance.

All his life he had managed to study not only the natural sciences but also English literature, mathematics, economics, and poetry until he was considered very proficient in each of them.

The portrait which accompanies this article was taken in 1958 and shows Mr. Palmer at his desk with a copy of his published book of poems entitled, "Gathered Leaves, Green, Gold and Sere." These poems, I understand, are truly gathered leaves, "leaves" which had been lying around in various places during the years and were gathered together by his wife and published through her efforts when Palmer was eighty-three years old.

His scientific papers were noted not only for his Latin descriptions but also for the fine phrasing which he always employed. He wrote so well and so easily that often he found it necessary to delete whole paragraphs from his papers because he considered the contents "unscientific." It was a pity because everyone would have enjoyed reading them.

Although he was dedicated to the life of a naturalist it was not until his meeting with Benjamin Franklin Bush, also from Missouri, that he tried his wings and ventured away from his home setting. When Bush died in 1937, Palmer published a resumé of his life in *The American Midland Naturalist*. On re-reading this biography one cannot help but be struck by the similarity in the early backgrounds, the interests, and, in fact, the entire careers of the two men.

In 1901, Bush, then a collector for the Arnold Arboretum, visited the Palmer home and spent a week there using it as a base for his botanical collections. Bush was especially interested in obtaining specimens of *Crataegus* for C. S. Sargent, then director of the Arnold Arboretum, and when he departed from Webb City he left with Palmer a supply of driers for further collections. Thus at the age of 25 Palmer began his lifelong interest in *Crataegus* and his association with Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum. For the next twelve years he collected extensively in his home area, concentrating on the flora of Missouri, and it was not until 1913, when he was 38, that he became associated with the Missouri Botanical Garden. Two years later at the age of 40 he began his many collecting trips to the Southwest under the aegides of both the Missouri Botanical Garden and the Arnold Arboretum.

Palmer began publishing as early as 1910, at which time his first paper, "Flora of the Grand Falls Chert Barrens" appeared in the *Trans-*

actions of the Academy of Science, St. Louis. During the next ten years he published seven papers, mostly on ferns. In 1920, while still a collector-at-large he sent in from Webb City to the newly organized *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* his first of many papers to be published by this Harvard University publication. Two more papers were published in this journal before he came to Jamaica Plain in 1921 as a regular staff member. He retained this status at the Arnold Arboretum for twenty-seven years, until he retired in 1948.

My personal association with Palmer began in 1927. By that time he was firmly established at the Arboretum as a collector-botanist. Since he was away so much of the time on his many collecting trips and since he was still a bachelor he maintained personal quarters in a rooming house.

He was a very busy man during this period. He managed to make a collecting trip nearly every year, usually alone, occasionally with a single companion. Upon his return from these trips his time was spent identifying his specimens, making up sets for distribution, and writing occasional papers — and getting ready for his next trip. He once mentioned to me that he had hopes of collecting in all the states of the Union. At the time he had nearly accomplished his intention. If I recall correctly he said that there were only two states in which he had not made “official” collections — and, as one might suspect, one of them was surprisingly close by!

The greater portion of his collections was made in the southwestern United States. However, he always maintained his interest in the Missouri flora, and, in 1935, there appeared in the *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* the 385-page article by Palmer and Steyermark, “An Annotated Catalogue of the Flowering Plants of Missouri.” This catalogue is more complete than is usual in such a publication. The first seventy-five pages are devoted to the botanical history, terrain, climate, plant regions, etc., of the state. Under the actual listing of the taxa may be found the habitat and a record of the counties wherein specimens of each entry had been collected. A footnote states that an earlier publication on the ferns and fern allies of Missouri published by the same authors three years earlier in the *American Fern Journal* should be considered supplementary to the 1935 Catalogue.

A recent letter to me from Julian Steyermark, the junior author of the above two publications, mentions that his latest publication, *Flora of Missouri*, which has been in press since 1959 is being dedicated to E. J. Palmer. Palmer had hoped to see the book and knew of the proposed dedication.

In 1930, when he reached the age of 55 he surprised us all by getting married. We had thought of him as a confirmed bachelor. He married Elizabeth McDougal, a bacteriologist at the Massachusetts State Laboratory which is located alongside the Arnold Arboretum. Naturally, a great change took place in Palmer's life. He eventually set up a fine home in one of the houses belonging to the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain. He and his wife had three children: Ernest Macdougal Palmer,

born in 1931; Grace Elizabeth Palmer, in 1932; and Theodore Windle Palmer, in 1935.

Palmer possessed a physique that defied age. He was the slender, wiry type and at the time of his retirement and departure from Jamaica Plain for Webb City could outlast any of us on a collecting trip. Although I did not see him again, I understand from his long letters and from various conversations with others that he continued his same brisk manner in everything which he undertook. His letters show that when he retired he merely transferred his activities from Massachusetts to Missouri. In a letter to me in February 1955 he says: "Of course we miss many friends there [Jamaica Plain], and I miss many of the associations at the Arboretum. But I have never been sorry that I retired when I did, for my life on the whole has been quite happy here. I have never been busier at any time or interested in more things. In April I will pass another anniversary — and you can figure it out as the records show that I was born in 1875. It is hard for me to believe it as I still feel as strong in body and mind — so far as I can tell — as I did at fifty. I can easily walk ten miles any day; and I think I could climb a good sized tree, if there was anything at the top of it that I wanted badly enough. . . Steyermark and I are still working actively on the Flora of Missouri . . . Specimens of *Crataegus*, *Quercus* and other genera keep coming to me for determination or revision. . . Other collections in my museum also occupy much time. . . I have agreed to talk to a joint meeting of all the Garden Clubs of Carthage at the public library. While I do not solicit or particularly enjoy speaking engagements, I fill them occasionally. . . It is so fine and warm today that I think I will go fossil hunting this afternoon." For a man retired and eighty years old he certainly was enjoying life to the fullest, doing exactly what he wanted to do — and he seemed so well equipped to do it!

During his life time Ernest Palmer joined many scientific organizations, among them: the American Fern Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Society of Plant Taxonomists, the Boston Mineral Club, the Botanical Society of America, the Missouri Archaeological Society, the New England Botanical Club (President, 1944–1945), and the St. Louis Academy of Science.

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* Compiled by Lazella Schwarten and Elizabeth M. Palmer.

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